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I'm a Jewish historian. Yes, we should call border detention centers “concentration camps.”

It isn't just accurate. It's necessary.

By Anna Lind-Guzik | Jun 20, 2019, 2:40pm EDT



People near the Rio Bravo in Mexico in May 2019; many migrants have crossed the river to reach the United States and request asylum. | David Peinado/NurPhoto via Getty Images

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This week, conservatives weaponized Jewish suffering to divert discussion from the massive human rights abuses occurring at our border.

Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY), daughter of the man who called torture **“enhanced interrogation,”** scolded Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) for using the term “concentration camp” to describe the growing civilian detention system, including the **reopening of Fort Sill**, previously a Japanese American internment camp, to **hold children**.

Since then, Jews have split on whether it’s appropriate to use “concentration camp” outside the context of the Holocaust. There are those who find the term too emotionally charged, or who believe the sheer scale of the Nazi Final Solution bars any possible comparison.

Though I disagree, I understand. My father turned seven on June 22, 1941, the day the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union. I was raised with the story of how my grandmother saved my dad and aunt with her quick thinking and a cramped spot on a cattle train leaving Odessa for Siberia. Those who remained were shot. As a Jew, I bear witness to the memory of those who did not survive.

I’m also a legal historian, and **my research** on genocide and crimes against humanity has made clear that while the Holocaust is unique in its scale and implementation, the perpetrators and motivations are not. Genocide is a human crime, not a German one. In the wake of World War II, human rights laws were written in the hopes of preventing future tragedies, not for labeling the past.

First, it’s important to note that despite the contemporary association of concentration camps with the Shoah, they are not a Nazi invention. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, various imperial forces — including the British and Germans in their African colonies, the Spanish in the Caribbean, and Americans in the West — engaged in the practice of rounding up civilians into concentration camps as a tactic to suppress indigenous guerrilla warfare. By isolating the civilian population, fighters had fewer places to hide. Large populations of mostly women and children were held in terrible, quasi-permanent conditions, without trial, and died en masse from disease, malnutrition, and exposure.

Historian Isabel Hull argues that the German military’s predisposition toward “final solutions” was first evident in the 1904 **internment** and genocide of **the Herero and Nama people** in the German colony of South West Africa, now Namibia, in what was already called a “concentration camp.” The term itself comes from *reconcentración*, a Spanish policy deployed against Cubans in the 1890s, which was then reused by the British during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

Meanwhile, Americans offended at the use of “concentration camp” should acquaint themselves with our own history of civilian detention. As early as 1862, American forces interned Dakota women and children at Fort Snelling. George Takei tweeted this week regarding the mass internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, “I know what concentration camps are. I was inside two of them, in America. And yes, we are operating such camps again.”

Applying the term “concentration camp” to the indefinite detention without trial of thousands of civilians in inhumane conditions — under armed guard and without adequate provisions or medical care — is not just appropriate, it’s necessary. Invoking the word does not demean the memory of the Holocaust. Instead, the lessons of the Holocaust will be lost if we refuse to engage with them.

If conservatives truly think that “concentration camp” is limited to Nazi death camps, where was the outrage when the Trump administration employed it to (correctly) describe the **mass detention of Uighurs in Xinjiang**? (Naturally, the Chinese government also hates the term concentration camp, preferring to call them “**vocational education training centers**.”)

Apart from the historical argument, there is a moral and geopolitical imperative for calling the atrocities happening on our southern border by their proper names. The international human rights regime depends on global cooperation, a veneer of accountability, and **American funding**. Trump eschews **soft power** in favor of military solutions, and is leading his fellow authoritarians in a race to the bottom. The 1951 Refugee Convention, while imperfect, once offered protections to stateless, persecuted people. That’s no longer true. **Asylum seekers at the Mexican border** are being treated like criminals despite having broken no laws. Locking up refugees in camps is the real betrayal of the legacy of the Holocaust.

As Hannah Arendt taught us in ***Eichmann in Jerusalem***, perpetrators depend on us being desensitized to the victims’ suffering. Using euphemisms to cover for atrocities is the essence of the banality of evil. This is why perpetrators work so hard to propagandize, criminalize, and dehumanize the Other. Authoritarians require enemies to blame for their inadequacies, and to distract their base from their diminishing quality of life.

The red flags at the border are obvious to those of us raised with “never again,” a phrase Ocasio-Cortez invoked: dehumanizing language, children in cages, families separated, the deaths of trans asylum seekers, rampant diseases, and subhuman living conditions. “Never again” means we must work to deescalate *before* atrocities rise to the horrors of Auschwitz. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Israel, was upset with Ocasio-Cortez for invoking the term, yet its **own materials** note that concentration camps for undesirables, including Jews,

Poles, Communists, gay people, and Roma, opened in 1933, while the death camps were opened starting in 1941.

It's tragic that Yad Vashem, an institution I've venerated and visited, has opted to chasten a young woman for calling out crimes against humanity that mirror what Jews endured less than a century ago, at the same that it **embraces visitors like Viktor Orban**, the anti-Semitic, ethnonationalist Hungarian prime minister.

In memory of the 6 million Jews who perished because they were considered less human, I will not accept my government treating migrants like animals. And as the daughter of a Soviet Jewish refugee, I will not accept the criminalization of stateless people. Perpetrators depend on complacency, on our inability to care for people unlike ourselves. No person is illegal, or a pest to be exterminated. If you don't like the term concentration camp, **help close them**.

*Anna Lind-Guzik is executive director of **the Conversationalist**. She is a writer, attorney, and scholar of Soviet history, international law, and human rights, with degrees from Duke University, Harvard Law School, and Princeton University. Follow her on Twitter @alindguzik.*

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